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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Article — Published Version

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Neue Gesellschaft, Frankfurter Hefte - International Quarterly Edition: Journal of Social Democracy

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Merkel, Wolfgang (2017) : The New Dictatorships, Neue Gesellschaft, Frankfurter Hefte - International Quarterly Edition: Journal of Social Democracy, ISSN 2194-3095, Dietz, Berlin, Iss. 1, pp. 17-21

This Version is available at:
http://hdl.handle.net/10419/216228

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The New Dictatorships

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* which appeared in 1951, still bore the deep imprint of the recently dismantled National Socialist terror regime and the most extreme excesses of Stalinism. The distinguishing features of totalitarianism as a regime type were then readily identifiable: an elaborate ideology of domination plus terrorism, both of which characterized the »short twentieth century's« history of political rule and warfare. Both Hannah Arendt and Harvard University scholar Carl Joachim Friedrich distinguished carefully between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes, Arendt said, curtailed freedom, whereas totalitarian rule did away with it entirely. In essence, the notion of totalitarianism focused on the untrammeled control that that those in power wielded over their subjects. Under such circumstances not even the state should be regarded as the principal locus of power. According to Arendt that role was played by the party – and of course its leader – that articulated the official word-view. Both totalitarian systems sought to legitimize their rule by deploying a grand ideological narrative, whether of the »classless society« in the case of Stalinism, or »the superiority of our race and nation« in the case of Nazism.

From the very outset, neither the concept nor the theory of totalitarianism was free of inconsistencies and over-hasty analogies. It was always a problematic move to

equate (at least implicitly) a Promethean idea of the »realm of freedom« (Karl Marx) with the darkness of a National Socialist ideology of annihilation. Of course, in practice these regimes displayed certain parallels – despite the dissimilarities – in respect to the uses of terror. Both erected Leviathan-like apparatuses that destroyed freedom and carried out deadly repression against Jews and class enemies, respectively.

During the Cold War the concept of totalitarianism continued to lose analytic clarity as it was used prematurely to describe all communist regimes and, increasingly, any dictatorship whatsoever. Not infrequently, it degenerated into a political rallying cry. In reality, truly totalitarian regimes were not that common in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1956, Nazi Germany from 1934/38 to 1945, some of the Eastern European satellite regimes in the 50s, China from the early 50s up until Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, and the autocratic Kim family dynasty in North Korea furnish irrefutable examples of totalitarian rule. In the early years of the 21st century the People's Republic of North Korea is the only totalitarian regime left. The theocratic Islamic regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia or of the Taliban in Afghanistan never have become fully totalitarian. Although their fundamentalist dogmas were intended to penetrate deeply into the everyday lives of the faithful, those governments lacked the mature state development that would have allowed them to translate their ambitions of complete control into a full-blown totalitarian reality.

Dictatorships in the 21st century

The long-lasting third wave of democratization that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet empire at the end of the 20th century altered the national and international conditions for political rule. If we disregard the more radicalized versions of Islam that have been emerging in some places, grand ideological narratives of political rule have disappeared. Given the globalized economic and communications networks that have emerged, it is an anachronistic fiction to imagine that autocracies could hermetically seal off a zone of political control. Political authority increasingly requires forms of justification that take freedom, political participation, and respect for human rights into account. New forms of autocratic rule came into being that scholars now classify under the heading of electoral authoritarianism, i.e., autocracies with elections. Such elections are quite distinct from those that were held in the Eastern Bloc in the era of »really existing socialism,« in which voter turnout exceeded 99 % and the communist candidates and those of their satellite parties typically won about 99 % of the votes cast. That kind of election is now a quaint relic of the past. Today, elections in authoritarian regimes in Africa or Asia no longer can be so easily managed as they were in the former Eastern Bloc. To be sure, they are manipulated, orchestrated, and rigged, but they also offer the opposition a welcome opportunity to mobilize, make alliances, and appeal to a national and international public. The new authoritarian desire to establish a formally democratic residue of legitimacy in the domestic and foreign arenas carries with it a risk to the legitimacy of those in power.

Formerly clear boundaries between prototypical democracies and dictatorships have grown increasingly blurred. Leaving aside merely polemical use of terms, who

would want to say exactly which of the following regimes should be counted as an autocracy or merely classified as a defective democracy: Russia under Vladimir Putin (or Boris Yelstin), the Turkey of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the contemporary Ukraine, Venezuela, the Philippines, or Singapore? Scholarly research on regimes has grown more cautious. Increasingly it avoids clear typologies and locates really existing regimes along a continuum between the ideal of democracy under the rule of law on the one hand and »perfect« dictatorship on the other. Such classifications thus leave many political regimes in a gray area between the ideal-types. Accordingly, researchers in the field are now talking about »gray area regimes.« These are then subdivided into hybrid regimes (Russia), »democraduras« (Venezuela), or defective democracies (Hungary). Furthermore, the gray area regimes are more stable than is commonly assumed, in that they do not move over time in the direction of becoming closed dictatorships or open democracies. They have long since established their own equilibrium, one that is sensitive to both historical and political contexts. Today, Putin, Erdoğan, and Orbán enjoy greater popularity among their respective citizen bodies – and the non-elites within them – than the chancellor of Germany or the President of France's Fifth Republic, although both of the latter govern democratic countries under the rule of law. This paradox is one aspect of the postmodern jigsaw puzzle: all across the globe forms of political authority are growing more differentiated.

How stable are the new dictatorships?

If we assume the tripartite division of political regimes into autocracies, hybrid regimes, and democracies, we can distinguish, among the 200 or so countries in the world, about 65 democracies under the rule of law and 45 unvarnished autocracies. Of the remainder, the majority are hybrid regimes in all of their different permutations.

So how stable are political regimes really? How durable are dictatorships? Statistically speaking, over the past 60 years democracies have been the most stable, followed by dictatorships, and finally by hybrid regimes. What is the reason for the relative stability of dictatorial regimes? In a study recently carried out at the Berlin Social Science Center we assumed that political rule in dictatorships, as incidentally in hybrid regimes as well, rests on three pillars: legitimation, repression, and cooptation.

Legitimation always derives from two sources, one normative and the other performance-based. Anti-liberalism, racism, nationalism, religiously anachronistic ideas of salvation, as well as Marxist visionary schemes all can generate at least temporary normative approval among those on the receiving end of political rule. However, in the early years of the 21st century fascist and communist ideologies have lost much of their appeal. If any ideologies still have the ability to create strong ties among their adherents nowadays, it would be the variants of Islamic political fundamentalism. But for them, restrictions on basic human rights are part of the canon of principles upon which their claims to rule depend. And, for that very reason, in the long run the wellsprings of their promises of salvation will likely dry up and the enchantment of their world will fade in the cold light of a repressive reality. Because the normative side of legitimation is sapped in this way, dictatorial regimes rely for support especially on their performance in the areas of the economy, security, and order. But autocratic regimes

also face risks if the economy and society modernize too rapidly. When that happens, middle classes form, workers unionize, educational levels increase, civil society emerges, and discourses get underway that invite broader political participation. However, this is not a trend that culminates inevitably in a successful process of democratization in the way that modernization theory optimistically still claims. That other outcomes are possible is confirmed by diverse countries such as Singapore, the People's Republic of China or the petro-dictatorships of the Gulf. The latter of course maintain enormous numbers of Southeast Asian slave laborers deprived of all rights, which enables them to evade the challenge of dealing with a self-confident domestic working class.

Second, autocracies rely on repression, which can assume different forms and levels of intensity. We distinguish in our research project (»Why do dictatorships survive?«) between »soft« and »hard« repression, although their boundaries are shifting. Whereas the first of these primarily aims to restrict political rights such as the freedoms of assembly, expression, press, and employment, the latter is designed mainly to attack the core of human rights, such as the right to life, physical integrity, and the liberty of the individual. It can be demonstrated empirically that elites in authoritarian systems of rule frequently react to threats to the status quo with intensified repression. Yet repression alone is scarcely capable of stabilizing a political regime in the long run. This is so because a great deal of legitimacy is being sacrificed. When repression is ratcheted up, its deterrent power is enhanced, but simultaneously there is a loss of legitimation and thereby of popular consent. High levels of hard repression are expensive, and ultimately they undermine the foundations of political authority. During the period that we examined (1950-2008), statistical evidence shows that soft repression was the most successful factor in stabilizing hundreds of dictatorships.

The third pillar of political domination is cooptation. It may enable elites in autocratic systems of rule to induct influential actors and groups outside the regime proper into the inner circle of the dictatorship. Strategically important elites of this type are generally recruited from among the economic elite, the security services, and the military. They are usually offered offices, political privileges, resources, and economic concessions as a quid pro quo for their loyalty. Corruption, clientelism, and patrimonial networks are their instruments.

Nevertheless, the availability of resources places limits on the duration and extent of »purchased« collaboration of broad groups with the regime. In our analysis we show that weaknesses in one of the pillars of rule can be offset by shoring up the other ones. Yet in some instances cracks in one pillar can overburden the others. Then spaces of protest open up that, if employed on a grand scale, can lead to the collapse of the entire regime. Of course, there are no guarantees that the rule of law and democracy will ensue from its demise. The many unsuccessful processes of transformation in the eastern portions of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Arab Spring all confirm this.

It is also possible to overestimate the stabilizing influence of cooptation. As a rule, the ideal equilibrium state for the survival of dictatorships would combine a high level of legitimation derived from ideology and performance, the least possible application

of »hard« repression, extensive »soft« repression, and a moderate degree of cooptation. Singapore approaches that equilibrium state most closely, while China is clearly headed in that direction. But even hybrid regimes such as Putin's Russia are not so far removed from an equilibrium of this sort.

Francis Fukuyama's thesis that we are witnessing the irreversible triumph of democracy (1991) proved to be a half-baked fantasy. The envisioned export of democracy from the West to the rest and of military regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya has failed dismally. The free societies of the West, East, and South will have to continue living and negotiating with dictatorships. There are no panaceas. Trade-offs have already been programmed in. A magical polygon still has not been devised that would accommodate values, interests, human rights, economy, democracy, and stability. There are no short cuts in dealing with dictatorships. It will take tedious negotiations, value-based pragmatism, and the proverbial long, hard road to get there.

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